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SUBJECT: VIETNAM: AMBASSADOR PRESENTS HIS CREDENTIALS TO  
PRESIDENT LUONG

1. SUMMARY: The Ambassador presented his credentials to Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong on September 27. Both agreed that there had been much progress in the nine years since relations had been reestablished, but there was a need to continue to broaden and deepen the relationship. President Luong cited trade and economics, accounting for Missing in Action and counterterrorism as areas where the two nations could further develop their relationship and said that he would like to meet with President Bush in Chile at the APEC meeting this fall. He asked the Ambassador to convey this message to President Bush. Noting that Vietnam's reaction to designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) had not been positive, President Luong said that he would have preferred to have a constructive dialogue to seek better mutual understanding. He and the Ambassador pledged to seek to discuss differences such as this one in an atmosphere of mutual respect. END SUMMARY.

2. The Ambassador accompanied by DCM, ECON/C, DATT and PA/C presented his credentials to President Tran Duc Luong at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi on September 27. Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang was the senior Foreign Ministry representative along with officials from the President's Office and the Office of Protocol.

3. Following the presentation of credentials, the Ambassador and his party had a twenty-minute audience with the President. The Ambassador noted that he was pleased to have the opportunity to serve in Vietnam where the bilateral relationship was in good shape following significant progress since normalization. He expressed hope that the relationship would continue to broaden and deepen. Noting that next year would be significant since it was the tenth anniversary of the establishment of relations, the Ambassador expressed the hope that PM Phan Van Khai would be able to visit the United States. The Ambassador remarked on the progress since normalization in trade and investment, education and culture, counterterrorism and the full accounting of the Missing in Action. He commented that there had been many positive transformations since he was first in Vietnam in the late 1980's. He observed that both President Bush and Secretary of State Powell had made clear that they view this relationship to be important and they hope that ties would continue to strengthen further. The Ambassador expressed his commitment to work toward this goal throughout his term.

4. The President responded by thanking the Ambassador for his words on the bilateral relationship and the future of relations as well as his commitment to work to better the relationship. Vietnam attaches great importance to its relations with the United States both because of the U.S. role in the world and the shared past on which both sides need to continue to work, the President said. He went on to agree that since the reestablishment of relations the bilateral relationship had moved in a positive direction. Noting that he was glad to see what had happened since the reestablishment of relations, President Luong enumerated several examples such as the signing and implementation of the Bilateral Trade Agreement, the opening of embassies in Washington and Hanoi, and the arrival of the third United States Ambassador in Hanoi. Although the time had not been long, important steps had been made, the President said.

5. The relationship could be called normal, but not quite yet comprehensive, the President continued. In many fields there is more to do. He listed trade and economics, accounting for the Missing in Action and counterterrorism cooperation. He also stressed that there was a need to work for better mutual understanding. To build a long-term relationship it is important for the government and peoples of one country to understand the history and culture of the other. This is especially true for sensitive issues like ethnic minorities and human rights, the President said. The two countries need dialogue and exchange of views to avoid problems.

6. The President noted that the Department of State had recently designated Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern regarding religious freedom. The reaction in Vietnam had not been positive, he added. It would be better to have constructive dialogue for better mutual understanding. A comprehensive relationship would benefit

the people of both countries.

17. The President noted that he shared the Ambassador's view that there had been many positive developments so far and there was much to do in the future. He added that he hoped the Ambassadors in Hanoi and Washington and their staffs would have many initiatives to mark the tenth anniversary.

18. The Ambassador responded that the United States would do its part to seek to arrange the visit of the Prime Minister in 2005. He also said that prospects were good that the President of the United States would come to Vietnam for the 2006 APEC Summit.

19. In response, President Luong noted that he would be going to Chile for APEC this fall and hoped for a short meeting with President Bush. He asked that the Ambassador convey his message to President Bush.

110. Noting that the Ambassador was a career diplomat with much experience in Asia including in Vietnam in the late 1980's, the President said he was pleased that the Ambassador had been struck by the many changes since those days. Vietnam, he said, was also pleased with those transformations since they are the manifestation of the right path that Vietnam has chosen. He said he hoped that the Ambassador would do his part to continue developing United States-Vietnam relations in order to help Vietnam develop so that it could give its people a better life.

111. The Ambassador replied that he was encouraged by the President's accurate description of the work ahead. He acknowledged that the two countries did have a "history," but emphasized that this shared history provides an opportunity. While no one can change history, our two peoples can seek to understand history and to build on it. Because of that history the two countries have and will have closer relations than if they had not had that history. Several million Americans have had experience with Vietnam and over one million others were born in Vietnam but live now in the United States. These people have a close connection with Vietnam and can be a force for making the relationship stronger.

112. The Ambassador went on to note that CPC was a decision that the Government of Vietnam did not welcome or accept, but that he was encouraged that officials of the two nations could discuss the issue and work on it in a positive way. Religious freedom is a core issue for the American people, he stressed. The CPC decision flows from the belief in the United States that international norms of religious freedom should be observed everywhere. Clearly the majority in Vietnam can practice their religious beliefs, but in some areas of Vietnam there are limits on people's ability to do so and this is what the United States would like to discuss. The United States and other countries as well as NGOs want to work to improve economic and social conditions in places like the Central Highlands in order to reduce tension over religion. The Ambassador pledged to do all he could to ensure that any discussion of religion took place in a manner of mutual respect. "We should," he said, "be like brothers who can speak frankly."

113. President Luong replied that he concurred with most of these views, but on religious freedom, he noted that a number of Vietnam's 80 million people could practice different religions. He expressed hope that the Ambassador would look at the issue in a positive way and agreed with the idea of discussing in a manner of mutual respect. This would be in the best interest for the long-term relationship, he said.

114. The President concluded the meeting by proposing a toast to good bilateral relations.  
MARINE